

## **Accounts of Afterlife from the Dead: How Useful Are They for the Dying?**

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Abstract: There are hundreds of accounts allegedly written by spirits who once lived on our planet and desire to tell us about the world they now inhabit, and that we too will inhabit once we pass. These messages come to us through mediums. This paper summarizes the world described in one of the richest of these accounts, Helen Greaves's *Testimony of Light*, then evaluates the evidence for its genuineness. Reasons pro and con are considered side by side. The author believes there are more reasons to trust the best accounts than to dismiss them as fraud or unconscious projections by mediums, though he warns that it is likely, if they *are* genuine, that they are somewhat contaminated by these projections. The author then wonders about the value of such accounts for readers, both those near death and those like us who are merely curious. He concludes that they hold out hope against extinction and that such hope is a great blessing for all, both healthy and dying, who fear death.

Key words: death, dying, survival, afterlife, heaven, medium, NDE, paranormal, astral, reincarnation

### **1. Introduction.**

You are about to become acquainted with a strange literary genre in which, it would appear, the primary authors are people we refer to as "dead." Their collaborators are known as mediums or channels, and we refer to them as "alive." When you want to buy one of their books, you should look it up under the medium's name, though most mediums say the real authors are the spirit communicators with whom they work. The Other-Side communication that I'll be reviewing here is, in my view, the best of the genre - the one I trust the most after twenty years of researching this dubious literature.

### **2. The Astral World that Awaits Us**

I will show you what the dangers of taking these writings at face value are toward the end. But for now, since time is short, I will summarize the main features of the account - which, incidentally, is remarkably consistent with other works in this genre.

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The title of the book is *Testimony of Light*, available in print. The medium, an English woman named Helen Greaves, was a best friend in earth life of Frances Banks, who for 25 years was an Anglican nun and at one point taught a youthful Alan Paton, the great South African novelist. Frances has been dead only a month when she first breaks through in December 1965.

"I am in a kind of rest home now" that "looks over a vast sunlit plane," Frances discovers as she recovers from her passing.<sup>1</sup> "So this is death," she reports a little later: "*Life separated by density* - that is all!"<sup>2</sup> She tells us how she witnessed her own memorial service in Exeter Cathedral, then embarks on her mission, which is to show us, the living, what lies ahead of us when we die, and what the overall meaning of human existence is - in whatever world we may find ourselves.

Here is a summary of some of the main points that Frances is eager for us to understand:

1. Most of us here on earth are reincarnated souls. We descend to earth from our astral home in order to be tested and proved in a challenging material environment. Soul-building, or character development, is the point of our sojourn on earth.

2. Many of us have ambitious plans for self-improvement when we start out at birth, but the density of earth's matter, including our own brain, causes us to forget what we came for. Subject to material concepts, we lose our way. We die, only to discover to our disappointment that we mostly failed to accomplish the goal we had set for ourselves. But for many of us it's OK, for there has been much growth in unpremeditated ways.

3. We are thoroughly ourselves when we come over at death. Our personalities and habits, for better or worse, are completely intact. The old or decrepit or injured bodies we left behind do not follow us into death. Yet we *are* embodied. And we are recognized by others who knew us on earth.

4. Frances does not refer to her world as heaven. Her world is actually a spectrum of worlds stretching from the lowly joys and satisfactions of a novice like herself, newly come over, to spheres of unimaginable radiance, perfection, and fulfillment.

5. The astral world - and it has many levels - is the very opposite of static or restful. "All is progress. Nothing is static," Frances tells us.<sup>3</sup>

6. The astral world provides opportunities for every wholesome interest or avocation - from science to music to theology to astral architecture. It is a joyful, endlessly fascinating place for those who desire to grow.

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7. Physical danger does not exist in the astral. Neither does physical illness. Eating is optional and sleep unnecessary. The calls of nature do not get even a mention.

8. Life in the astral is more vivid and intense than on earth, not more ghostly. Astral beings have fewer limitations. They can communicate telepathically and with much greater precision than through the cumbersome medium of speech. They can move from place to place by willing to be at their destination, though they can walk if they want to. Their minds are sharper, their emotions more acutely felt, both positive and negative. "I realized that I could both see and hear as before, only now in a more intense way," Frances writes.

9. Many astral inhabitants maintain a lively interest in the events of earth and long to help it progress. She maintains that many of earth's most brilliant achievements were inspired by astral beings telepathically projecting their ideas. Nor do "the dead" forget their loved ones, whom they often seek to help with what we might call prayer in reverse.

10. Frances describes many of the people she meets, from an ex-Nazi suicide tormented by a young Jewish woman he executed, to a 12-year-old girl who longs to dance, to a brilliant atheistic scientist, to a humble Christian missionary, to a petty thief. Her world is a society of fascinating people, most of them flawed and incomplete in some way or another.

11. She tells us we must not expect to meet an embodied personal God in the astral world. However, we are surrounded by something far greater: an all-pervasive, penetrating Divine Light, full of understanding and love. This Light does not judge us, at least from the outside. We seem to judge ourselves.

12. We celebrate the presence of that Light in powerful rituals involving supremely grand music and displays of light, which Frances describes in astonishing language.

13. We are not allowed to overreach in the world to come, but must grow in wisdom and love gradually. We cannot enter a vibration we are not ready for. This can be humbling for over-eager souls like Frances. There is justice in where we end up at death. There is definitely a law of karma. We gravitate to our rightful place. We can move ahead only when we are changed enough to do so.

14. Hell, or the Shadow Lands, is a real ghetto of "gloomy murk" created by vibrations slower than other regions of the astral world. Lost souls populate these regions, and missionary spirits try to minister to them. A few respond; most jeer and seem to prefer their dull but comfortable lives over a

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bracing life in the realms of Light, where they would have to face up humbly to their errors and crimes and repent them.

15. Many people who have died fail to grasp their condition; some, especially those who were certain that death meant extinction, even refuse to believe they have died. For the landscapes of the astral world are similar to the landscapes of earth they left behind.

16. No one floats on a cloud or plays a harp. There are cities, houses, landscapes, gardens, universities, libraries, and hospices for the newly dead - but no factories, fire stations, sanitary landfills, or smokestacks. There are no dirty jobs to do.

17. There are three basic ways to progress on the Other Side: admitting defects in one's character, service to others, and yearning for higher states. Service to others demands effort, work, sacrifice. Nowhere does Frances describe a deity who requires us to flatter or glorify him with our prayers. That is not the way to progress.

18. There are no rigid creeds or magical beliefs that souls have to accept. Whether you are a Baptist or a Catholic or a Mormon or a Hindu or a Buddhist or a Muslim or an Anglican is of no importance. What is important is the quality of your love and your commitment to change yourself.

19. There are no masks on the Other Side. You cannot hide from others what you are: the quality of light shining forth from your body tells all. This fact can be humiliating at first - as it was for Frances.

20. The sense of earth time fades fast. There is duration, but nothing like clock-time with its schedules and deadlines.

21. Old friends and former teachers, some from earlier lives, some long forgotten, turn up and renew old friendships.

22. We can also expect to meet Christ-like beings, Beings of Light far advanced, just like the Beings of Light described by NDErs.

23. We are all members of families, or Soul Groups, that await us when we come over, some numbering in the thousands. We will feel as if we are coming home when we are received by the familiar group.

24. As we progress in the next world, we will eventually slough off our astral body, just as we sloughed off our gross body at physical death. Then we will operate out of a spiritual body, or what Frances calls a Body of Light.

25. Frances is not naked, but clothed. Astral clothing is fashioned by the mind. There are no clothes closets in her world.

26. Our prayers for those who have passed are efficacious and deeply appreciated by them.

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27. Frances does not meet Jesus.

### 3. Evidence of Validity

Can we trust Helen Greaves, the medium, who claims she is channeling Frances? That is the big question. It's the question that confronts us whenever we read channeled literature. How do we decide?

We'll begin with the book I've just summarized, *Testimony of Light*. First we'll look at reasons for trusting the account, then reasons for suspicion.

1. Helen Greaves, the medium, is a woman whose integrity is vouched for in a preface and a foreword, the latter written by an Anglican canon. Greaves is not a professional medium who writes to make a living. "I do not use these perceptions professionally," she tells us, "or for personal gain of any sort."<sup>4</sup>

2. Those who have read her articles and an earlier book report that the style of *Testimony* is typical of Frances and "completely unlike the style of writing" of Greaves. Greaves herself reports, "I could *feel* her mind was using mine."<sup>5</sup>

3. The writer of the Foreword, R. M. Lester, knew both women and assures us that the personality and character of Frances is consistent with that of Frances when she was in the flesh.

4. Greaves claims that she wrote rapidly, almost as if she were taking dictation when Frances was coming through:

My pen scarcely lifted from the page. When I read through what I had written my astonishment grew. This happened for several days and I became more astounded at the subjects upon which I had written. I could not, without effort and without definitely searching my limited imagination, have invented such stories as poured through me.<sup>6</sup>

She goes on to explain, "There was hardly a correction made in all the hundreds of words written, though I was never aware of what I was going to write."<sup>7</sup> In my view, anyone who reads *Testimony* will likely marvel at it even if Greaves needed years to write it. If it's not what it claims to be, it is an astonishing work of the imagination. In this short space I cannot begin to suggest its riches.

5. There are many other accounts like Greaves', though much less rich, and they provide for each other a kind of mutual corroboration due to their similarity - as when the accounts of two or more witnesses of a traffic accident, though differing in details, point to a real event, not something imagined.

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6. There is a humility in her account suggesting genuineness. For example, in developing the story of the young Jewish woman attached by hatred to the Nazi commandant, Frances tells us what became of the woman's husband, but of the couple's only child, Frances says, "I know nothing."<sup>8</sup> I doubt that a good story teller would fail to give some account of the child. Nor would the medium's imagination have failed to fabricate such an account (if it was a fabrication) after coming up with so many rich details at every page. Frances herself seems humble; there is a great deal she does not know, and she *knows* she does not know. This humility is inconsistent with the theory that Greaves is a charlatan or that Greaves's subconscious imagination is the real author.

But not so fast. There are reasons to reserve judgment on the book's credibility. Here they are.

1. Our senses tell us that the dead are dead, and nothing more. Greaves is asking us to deny our senses.

2. We simply have no empirical evidence that the world she elaborately describes exists. We have no photos and no instruments that register such a world. It may be no more real than the world imagined by a science fiction writer.

3. Greaves, like most of us, would love to believe that life continues beyond death. Perhaps books like *Testimony of Light* testify to that belief, not to an actual world.

4. Greaves says many things that are inconsistent with the Bible, the Qur'an, or whatever scripture the critic may hold to be infallibly true.

5. Even if Frances and Greaves are communicating, there is no guarantee that Frances is coming through without obstruction. In fact, many Other-Side communicators complain through their mediums that the medium's biases are getting in the way of a clear channel. Could not this be happening in Greaves's case? Greaves would be the first to admit the possibility; that is why she is so surprised and delighted when she reads back what she has written, but could never have imagined. For her the scripts prove their own authenticity. But what about for us?

Let me tell you what I think. There is no chance at all that Greaves is a conscious fraud. But there is a real possibility that the entire book has been fabricated by her imagination. We know what elaborate stories patients sometimes tell their hypnotists when they are regressed. I would give this possibility about one chance in four of being correct.

Even less likely is it that Frances has gotten her otherworldly message across exactly as she would have liked. I suspect that never happens in

collaborations like this one. For there is the ever-present danger that the medium will stop being a completely uncontaminated receiving station, and will instead let her own ideas intrude and corrupt the message. My own view after reading so many complaints by communicators themselves is that this frequently happens. I can only trust - and I am inclined to think - that Greaves *usually* succeeds in keeping her own views out of the message.

In other cases there are more reasons to think that the communicator is real and the message untainted. For example, one of the greatest mediums in history, the English clergyman Stainton Moses, was at times completely unaware of what he was writing. He explained:

I cultivated the power of occupying my mind with other things during the time that the writing was going on, and was able to read an abstruse book and follow out a line of close reasoning while the message was written with unbroken regularity [with] no fault in composition and often a sustained vigour and beauty of style.<sup>9</sup>

This points with some force to another mind doing the writing through Moses's hand, as well as to the lessened likelihood of mediumistic contamination.

In still other cases, the handwriting of the medium is not her own. And in the case of voice mediums the voice is not her own. The celebrated Irish medium Geraldine Cummins produced about fifty different personalities and styles in her career, many matching deceased persons known to their survivors. She was the channel for the most famous Other-Side communication in history, titled *The Road to Immortality*, in which F. W. H. Myers laid out "the progression of the human spirit through eternity," stage by stage.<sup>10</sup> Writing in a light trance, she wrote at stupendous speed with no idea of what her hand was to produce, and in a hand much larger than her own.

A third way of evaluating the genuineness of a mediumistic account is through what is known as "evidential." An evidential communication is one "containing correct information about deceased persons which, on the face of it, could not have been known to the medium."<sup>11</sup> For example, if a medium in trance channeling a spirit were to write down the whereabouts of an important deed in the spirit communicator's personal library back on earth that was unknown to anyone else, and the deed was subsequently found at that very spot, the communication would be said to have evidential. There is a great deal of

evidential in some mediumistic accounts, though not so much in *Testimony of Light*.

On balance, I find that all these considerations make a strong case for the authenticity of our best channeled literature. For me they are true revelations, and the world they describe, with so much congruity, has a strong probability of being true.

#### 4. The Usefulness of Mediumistic Accounts

These accounts are potentially useful for two types of people: the dying and the healthy - in other words, just about everyone. Let's begin with the healthy. *Testimony of Light*, the book I end my Death course with at the university where I teach, creates a real stir. Fundamentalist Christians and Muslims dislike it, and hard-core materialists dismiss it. But the majority of the class are intrigued, and more than a few have told me it's the most important book they ever read, for it tells them what the purpose of life is as nothing else ever did. I personally find the book exhilarating and inspiring. If the purpose of life isn't something like what Frances tells us it is, it *should* be. And if I were the divine designer, I'm guessing it would be.

What of the dying or the very old who read a book like this for the first time? If I had made a bad job of my life, I would be concerned; I might even prefer extinction to Frances's world. But for a decent person with a few months to live, this book would be, I am sure, a godsend. The otherworldly visions of dying patients that are recounted by hospice nurses produce great joy and peace in the dying, and the near-death experience almost always removes the fear of death from the one who has it. It is hard to imagine a greater blessing for people close to death - or for readers of such accounts who fear death, as almost all of us do. All the better if, not only do we lay aside our fear of becoming nothing when we die, but we have something fairly concrete that we can look forward to. Mediumistic accounts of the world awaiting us at death provide just that.

#### 5. Summary

John Calvin thought it best to resist the temptation to speculate on the nature of the afterlife, since the Bible says so little about it. Right or wrong, his advice is being ignored today by millions of curious seekers, of all ages, whether near death or not, who lap up the literature of afterlife - from books about the near-death experience (NDE), to accounts by the slowly dying who report seeing visions of the world to come, to the ever-growing literature purporting to come from the dead themselves speaking through mediums. This last kind of literature



has been the focus of this paper. Some of it is fraudulent, while some of it is sincere. Some of it is poorly written, while some of it is eloquent. Some of it is silly and hackneyed, while some of it is fortifying and deeply inspiring. We have explored together one of the richest samples of such writing. We then surveyed the kind of evidence commonly used to authenticate such a message. Finally, in spite of Calvin's caveat, we showed why such literature should be publicized and read by many kinds of readers.

### Notes

- 1 H. Greaves (F. Banks), *Testimony of Light*, Neville Spearman Publishers, Saffron Walden, England, 1969, p. 27.
- 2 *ibid.*, p. 31.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 117-118.
- 4 H. Greaves, p. 13.
- 5 *ibid.*, p. 24.
- 6 *ibid.*, p. 24.
- 7 *ibid.*, pp. 24-25.
- 8 H. Greaves (F. Banks), p. 57.
- 9 N. Fodor, *Encyclopaedia of Psychic Science*, University Books, London, 1966, p.250.
- 10 *ibid.*, p. 10.
- 11 A. Gauld, *The Founders of Psychical Research*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1968, pp. 78-79.

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### The Afterlife Accounts I Most Value

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